



PSDiver Monthly

Volume Number 3



ISSUE 38

May 2007

Authorized Reprint – PSDiver Monthly is a free Internet magazine dedicated to Water Rescue and Recovery Teams. Visit us at <http://www.psddivermonthly.com/>



Drowning Accident Survivors and Family Members: Crisis Intervention on Scene

By Nancy J. Rigg

Founder/Moderator, Drowning Support Network

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) specialists understand that all drowning deaths and other serious or fatal accidents in the aquatic environment automatically qualify as “critical incidents.” Sudden, powerful emotional trauma can have an immediate and long-term impact on surviving family members and other witnesses who are on scene, as well as water rescue and recovery personnel responding to these emergencies.

Research has shown that the sooner survivors are educated about the impact of trauma the better their chances are of making a healthy recovery, even from the

most tragic loss. Water rescue personnel who are well educated in CISM also have a better chance of maintaining a long and healthy career in an environment that is not only dangerous physically, but taxing emotionally.

CISM peer support resources are being made available at an increasing rate to emergency responders nationwide. Unfortunately, for those who are most seriously affected by any given tragedy – the families – crisis intervention information is scarce, if available at all, and at a time when they most need sensible, accurate information and guidance, they may have no idea where or how to find it.

CISM trained chaplains and crisis counselors need to be woven into the structural matrix of all water rescue and recovery teams, including the pre-planning process. These skilled volunteers can work with pre-set, automatic call-out protocols to avoid confusion and



ensure that appropriate resources respond quickly. Crisis counselors can serve as liaisons with the families and others on scene, freeing dive rescue personnel to attend to other issues. They can also work with public information officers (PIOs) to protect families from media intrusion, especially during prolonged recovery missions. This is something that is frequently overlooked in the pre-planning process, which can result in added stress and trauma for family members who are waiting at the edge of the water for news about their missing loved one.

By integrating CISM trained volunteers into your response matrix, water rescue and recovery team members can also be buffered from the emotionally draining job of working with the families and others who are invested in the outcome of the mission. Trained crisis counselors can aid families, watch for signs and symptoms of shock and other physical ailments that may need medical attention, and also keep an eye on the emotional well being of rescue personnel on scene.

Information: Too Much... Too Little

One of the more difficult judgment calls to make is how much information to share with families, the media, and other interested parties, and in what

manner the information is relayed. It is rarely helpful to sugar coat the truth, but it can also add unnecessary layers of trauma when “too much” graphic information is presented to families who are aching for news, or when they are visually exposed to their deceased loved ones who may be maimed or disfigured or covered in silt and grime. If possible, remains should be secured in a closed body bag before being brought to the surface where both the media and anxious relatives of the victim are watching closely.



The media does not have an automatic right to cover every phase of the recovery process. Having both a PIO and crisis counselor on scene can help control interaction with members of the media who feel entitled to every aspect of “the story.” PIOs can aid the media in “getting the story,” in a way that is professional, but not intrusive either to the surviving family members, or the deceased victim, who also deserves protection and to be treated with dignity.

CISM trained counselors, who also need to be educated in water rescue and recovery, can evaluate how best to interact with the survivors and what details to share with them. It is important to have a collaborative effort. Although it is not wise to

withhold information, neither do you need to batter someone with gruesome details that can add to the post-traumatic stress cauldron already brewing.

If a family member feels compelled to view their loved one's remains, then this needs to be aided, not impeded, but the request should be filtered through the issue of trauma exposure. An on-scene crisis counselor can assist in making this process the least vividly traumatic possible.

Death and dying pioneer, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, always stressed that while viewing remains must be a choice open to the family, rescuers can make it less traumatic by making the remains as clean and presentable as possible. If the face is disfigured, Kubler-Ross recommends having the family view an arm or article of clothing. If there is severe decomposition, Kubler-Ross recommends against viewing the remains on scene, but rather viewing them later in the morgue, using photos or other appropriate means. If family members can be accompanied by the on-scene CISM trained counselor when they go to the morgue, this can help maintain continuity of care and ease the shock and trauma of this experience as well.

Building Resources

In today's world, rescuers should not be expected to serve in the capacity of on-scene crisis intervention

Nancy created a handout for victim's family members and friends. You are welcome to copy it and use it as your own as part of your service to the families. To download the file, go to www.PSDiverMonthly.com, click on Documents and Forms and the file titled "When You Have Lost a Loved One"

WHEN YOU HAVE LOST A LOVED ONE IN A DROWNING ACCIDENT

specialist, which is a discipline that requires specialized training that meets current disaster mental health standards. Some cities, including Los Angeles, have developed highly trained volunteer community crisis support teams that respond to

homicides, fires, major traffic accidents, mass casualty incidents and other accidents and emergencies, and assist local agencies with death notifications. Volunteers receive specialized training necessary to provide immediate on-scene crisis intervention, emotional support, and referrals. Many volunteers are multi-lingual and sensitive to diverse cultures.

The American Red Cross is another invaluable resource through their Disaster Mental Health program. Tragedies do not necessarily need to be on the scale of a major disaster to involve skilled Red Cross specialists.

For rescuers, the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation is an invaluable resource, with information about CISM programs and peer support teams nationwide.

At the very least, water rescue and recovery teams would do survivors a tremendous service by giving them a simple printed hand-out, like the one developed by the Drowning Support Network, with

additional crisis counseling resources listed in the local community. Flashbacks, nightmares, and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress are normal in the aftermath of a sudden and traumatic drowning or other aquatic accident, but this is not well understood in the general community. Education is vital.

First responders are the first stop for surviving family members on the road to recovery. Your interaction, pre-planning, and coordination with crisis support resources can lay the foundation for families to begin a healthy recovery process even in the aftermath of the most devastating of personal tragedies.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Drowning Support Network

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/DrowningSupportNetwork>

Los Angeles Crisis Response Team

<http://lafd.org/crt.htm>

PSDiver Monthly is edited and published by [Mark Phillips](#)

Assistant Editor: [Dominique Evans-Bye](#)

Continuing Education Editor: [Chuck Elgin](#)

For advertising and sponsor rates, please email: psdivermonthly@aol.com



The Bereaved Parents USA website has outstanding brochures that need to be read and made available universally, including:

EMERGENCY PERSONNEL: HOW TO HELP THE FAMILY AFTER THE SUDDEN ILLNESS, INJURY OR DEATH OF A CHILD

<http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/images/pdfs/bpusaemerg.pdf>

WHEN A CHILD DIES: WHAT MEDICAL PERSONNEL CAN DO

<http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/images/pdfs/bpusachild.pdf>

SUDDEN DEATH

<http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/images/pdfs/suddendeath.pdf>

...And **For the Newly Bereaved...**

<http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/images/pdfs/NewlyBereaved.pdf>

Copies are available in English and Spanish in bulk for purchase. Or you can download them in PDF form.